

An Investigation of CEOs' Learning Experiences: Implications for Leadership Training

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This study explored the learning experiences of CEOs in organizations for profit throughout the United States. Malcolm Knowles theory of Andragogy was used as the framework of the inquiry. While the CEO's position is considered unique from other executive positions, it has not been the focus of many studies. The findings suggest how CEOs learn and how the implications of this research can be used to improve leadership development programs in HRD

Keywords: CEOs, Leadership Development, Adult Learning

Today's organizations worldwide are faced with many new challenges in business. Leaders must learn new strategies, competencies and skills in order to lead organizations successfully in this new age (Collins & Holton III, 2003; Kotter, 1988; Sherlock 2002; Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Senge, 1990). Even though the literature asserts that the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) plays a key role in the success of the organization, few studies have concentrated on understanding how the CEOs learn (Sherlock, 2002; Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Many studies have focused on how senior executives learn, but few studies have focused exclusively on how the Chief Executive Officers learns (CEO) (Collins and Holton III, 2003; Sherlock, 2002). "This lack of understanding of how CEOs learn has negative workplace implications for both CEOs and the organizations they serve. It produces an information void for both the CEO seeking self-development, as well as executive development practitioners who seek to facilitate CEO development in both current CEOs and potential successors" (Sherlock, 2002, p. 632).

The purpose of this paper is to explore how CEOs' learn, and relate the information to expand the literature on leadership training in organizations. The research study used Andragogy by Malcolm Knowles as the lens to examine the topic because the framework of Andragogy with its core adult learning principles works well when it is adapted to fit the uniqueness of the learners and the learning situation (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). This paper first defines the terms and theoretical framework. Then, the paper provides a summation of how qualitative research methods were used as a lens to examine the learning experiences of 33 CEOs' from real estate companies throughout the United States. Last, the paper relates the conclusions and implications of the research to add to the literature for developing leadership training and education programs in HRD.

Definition of Terms and Theoretical Framework

Professional Context

"Professional Context" was operationalized in this study to mean CEOs of large real estate companies who operated for profit in the United States. Serving as CEO is unique context, because he/she has the highest level of staff accountability for achieving organizational goals and power dynamics between 1) The CEO and the staff reporting to him/her, and 2) The CEO and the Board of Directors to whom the CEO reports (Sherlock, 2002).

The CEO is recognized as a unique position that allows the person to occupy a position of unique influence in the firm" (Mintzberg, 1983). The result of the degree of power that the CEO has, and his/her role and responsibilities, the literature states that this creates a unique "professional context" that is unlike others who are in an executive capacity (Sherlock, 2002).

Leadership

The definition of leaders and leadership is an elusive concept, although written about often, the concept has been vague and ambiguous. The definition of leaders in this study was operationalized to as that defined by James MacGregor Burns (1978) in his book *Leadership*: "Leadership is leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations-the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations-of both leaders and followers. And the genius of leadership lies in the manner in which leaders see and act on their own and their followers= values and motivations" (p.3).

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Andragogy.

This qualitative research study used the concept of Andragogy by Malcolm Knowles as the framework of inquiry to explore the learning phenomenon of how CEOs perceive and describe their learning from an adult learning perspective. The concept of Andragogy by Malcolm Knowles is defined as “the art and science of helping adults learn” (Knowles, 1980, p. 43). Andragogy transformed the study of adult learning. A review of the literature acknowledged that the following concept has been used to examine on how adults learn in organizations (Knowles, 1995; Gilley and Egglund, 1989). Additionally, Andragogy is a unique concept that focuses on the internal process of how adults learn.

Malcolm Knowles (1980, 1995) concept of Andragogy, adult learning theory is based on the assumption that learning is an internal process of which the locus of control resides with the learner. Five key assumptions form the tenets of Andragogy by Knowles (1980; 1995):

Self-concept of the learner. Adults have a deep psychological need to be self-directing. As adults, they have a deep psychological need to be perceived by others and treated by others as able to take responsibility for themselves (Knowles, 1995). Adults do not want to find themselves in situations where they feel that others are imposing their will on them without their participation in making decisions that affect them. When this happens, adults feel resentment and resistant. As a result, the Andragogical process assumes that adults should enter in the design process of a program.

Role of experience. Adults bring with them a rich background of experiences that is a valuable resource for their own learning and that of other students. Adults come to situations with a depth and breadth of experience than can be used as a resource for theirs and other learning (Knowles, 1980, 1995).

Readiness to learn. Adults learn more effectively when adults see that the information is relevant to their lives. It assumes that the facilitators need to help adults see how the training programs or courses can help them perform more effectively in their jobs.

Orientation to learn. Adults enter into educational or training activities to acquire prescribed subject-matter. Educational activities need to help adults in the process of acquiring content in organized units, sequenced according to logic of the subject matter.

Motivation to learn. “Each person is unique and brings with his/her own goals and internal motivators; it assumes that learning plans and strategies must be highly individualized” (Knowles, 1995, pp. 1-3). The Andragogical Model acknowledges that adults will respond to external motivators such as a promotion, a change of jobs or a change in technology; it assumes that the most powerful motivators are internal (i.e. self-esteem, recognition by peers, better quality of life, greater self-confidence, self-actualization), and that program announcements should emphasize these benefits (Knowles, 1995).

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How did the leaders describe and perceive their learning?
2. What were the common learning strategies the leaders used to learn?
3. How can these strategies be utilized to improve leadership training programs in organizations?

Methodology

The study used phenomenological research design to explore how CEOs perceived and described their learning in this context. In phenomenology, an interview has a unique potential to provide an understanding of the lived experiences of participants that helps to explicate the meaning of the phenomena (Van Manen, 1990). There are various approaches and methods used with phenomenology, but all of them contain certain common characteristics (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). This methodology allowed the researcher to explore the subject through formal and informal interviews, and gain new insights from the themes that emerged (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research methodology was used for the research because an intensive description and analysis of the phenomenon would uncover the interplay of significant factors that are characteristic of the phenomenon (Merriam & Simpson, 1995). A key goal for HRD practitioners is to strive for insight into the human experience and provide a new level of understanding that strengthens current knowledge in the area (Van Manen, 1990).

Participants

By means accorded in the methodology (Lincoln & Guba, 1995), 33 CEOs of real estate companies throughout the United States were purposely selected because they represented successful business organizations for profit in the United States in the field. The researcher’s knowledge of and work experience in the field was helpful in gaining

research access to 33 CEOs. The sample was limited to individuals who were considered exemplar executives in the field based on characteristics of top professional in the membership profile of the National Association of REALTORS® (1996). Participants characteristics were: (a) 27 were men and six were women. (b) The ages of the respondents ranged from mid-40s to 70 years old. (c) The respondents had practiced a minimum of 10 years in the business, and (d) had been CEO for a minimum of five years. (e) had completed a minimum of a bachelor's degree, and (d) all took CPE regularly to increase knowledge.

Procedure

The researcher studied the respondents and their companies for two years. Standardization was obtained by taping one formal interview with each respondent using questions that were designed in advance, and all respondents were asked the questions in exactly the same sequence and manner (Lincoln and Guba, 1995). In addition to the 33 formal taped interviews with each CEO, additional informal interviews, both face-to-face and telephone were taped with consent of the participants to clarify answers or gather additional information. The researcher used structured, open-ended questions to explore participants' perceptions regarding the subject matter. The characteristics that emerged from the interviews were validated through documents, journals, a literature review and discussions with other CEOs and educators in the field.

After the completion of the data analysis process, another phase of data analysis, a search for themes, was begun. The process used "concept mapping" (Smith & Associates, 1990) as a diagnostic tool. "A concept map depicts in a diagrammatic form, ideas, examples, relationships, and implications about a particular concept. The center or core idea is placed at the center or top of the page, and radiating from it are a number of spokes or lines leading to other concepts related to, or indicated of the central idea" (Smith et al., p. 49). Concept mapping enabled the researchers to group similar examples of large concepts together, and smaller concepts were set aside until they could be integrated into the larger themes; this process allowed the dominant themes to emerge from the data.

In order to examine the data from the formal interviews, tables were designed to display the data, and quotations from respondents and further explanation were presented by the researcher as needed to explain the data. The characteristics that emerged from these in-depth interviews were validated through review of tapes, transcriptions, and field notes of the interviews. The researcher contacted the respondents several times during this study as well as reviewed all published information about their companies and themselves in order to obtain accurate information. The respondents also received copies of the final transcribed tapes and edited any personal information that they did not want in the final case study. The information was further validated through documents, journals, literature review, and discussions with other CEOs and educators in the field.

The similarity of the process of the information gained in the research made possible the rich, descriptive data needed to interpret the phenomenon being investigated as explained by Merriam and Simpson (1995).

Limitations

Since this qualitative study was based on a small sample of 33 CEOs in real estate, the study can not attempt to predict how CEOs learn in all contexts. Although qualitative studies can lead to deeper insights into the area of the study, findings from qualitative studies cannot be generalized in the same way as the findings from random samples. In addition, although the researcher spent considerable face-to-face time to establishing rapport and trust with the CEOs, the study is also limited by the willingness of the participants to discuss their personal learning experience. For these reasons, this study should be the first step to lead to further research on the subject.

Results and Findings

The results provided information and data that led to deeper understanding on all three research questions. This section presents the themes that emerged from the interviews with the participants that describe how they learn using adult learning principles of Andragogy. The 33 CEOs in this study presented similar stories that led to consistency of the 12 themes presented in this section.

Themes That Emerged

Theme 1. Be lifelong learners. The Andragogical Model supports that adults will respond to some external motivators for example, a chance for promotion, a change of jobs, or a change in technology. The Model proposes that the more potent motivators are internal-such as self-esteem, recognition by peers, better quality of life, great self-confidence, self-actualization. The CEOs recognized that success in their job requires a dedication to be lifelong learner to deal with the changes and challenges in business. The CEOs believed that utilizing opportunities for continual learning was one of the most important reasons they chose and were successful in business. They used phrases such as "being on the top of the heap," "being innovative," "learning faster than competitors," and "being a quick study," which expressed what made these CEOs' love the field. Respondents explained that with the

development of newer technologies, new laws, and constant restructuring of companies they must continue to adapt and learn in order to remain successful in the business. CEOs often described how they had entered into training programs or educational activities that were offered at the organization to obtain valuable information. They felt that they learned better when learning activities are designed in a logical order for the material. They always felt that they are short on time, and they do not want to attend learning activities in which the material is not organized in a way for them to learn it easily.

Theme 2. Use entrepreneurial characteristics. Knowles (1995) asserts that adults learn from their life experiences, and they are motivated to learn for personal change and career advancement. CEOs stated the CEO is a unique position, and that they succeed because they concentrate on learning and thinking in new ways which they believe centers on learning by using the characteristics of entrepreneurs as they have read the literature by several authors (McClelland, 1965; Meyers, 1986; Peters, 1994). CEOs state that they embraced qualities of entrepreneurship by being: 1) Creative; 2) Innovative; 3) Risk takers; 4) Possess interest in concrete knowledge of the result of decision (i.e., money as a measure of success); 5) They have need for achievement; and 6. Take personal responsibility for their learning. (McClelland, 1965, p. 389).

Throughout the interviews, CEOs continually conveyed the importance of being able to use information in creative and innovative ways to succeed. Their statements affirmed writings by Roberts (1994) that people who are innovative create their future. Roberts stated, "You learn rapidly from experience, and continually improve your ability to take effective action and produce results" (p. 228). CEOs repeatedly explained that their position demands that they think like an entrepreneur and are self-directed learners who take responsibility for knowing how to investigate situations using a variety of strategies to propose innovative solutions.

Theme 3. Develop interpersonal skills. The Andragogical Model assumes that adults enter into an educational activity with a greater volume and a different quality of experience than youths. The greater volume is obvious in regard to the interpersonal skills of the CEOs. CEOs said that they had developed outstanding interpersonal skills. CEOs explained that business was a "people business" and successful leaders must be able to utilize interpersonal skills to interact with customers, CEOs, experts, the public and members of the board of directors.

Although 33 CEOs believe in practicing an "open-door" policy that encourages effective communication with everyone who is important to their organizations, the six women CEOs attributed the formation of their interpersonal skills to being a women in American society. They believed that women, more than men, are encouraged from childhood to learn how to communicate effectively with family members and friends. Young girls are able to express ideas openly, share information, and receive feedback. The women emphasized the ability to listen is an important skill CEOs need to learn in the business. They also stressed that the ability to deal with nonverbal signs of communication is also critical skills for leaders to serve diverse workforces, publics and populations.

Theme 4. Value expertise. The Andragogical Model assumes that adults benefit from former rich life experiences. As in the Andragogical Model, the CEOs in this study have been in their role for over five years, and as such have had vast life experiences and different quality of experiences the non-CEOs in their companies. The respondents felt that they had gained knowledge through experience and practice that had enabled them to become experts in their area of the business similar to literature on expertise (Benner; 1994; Smith, 1982, 1990; Weinstein, 1998; 1999). The respondents frequently explained that they valued expertise, and they constantly seek other experts. They described two types of experts who they sought to keep learning in the business: 1) Other people who were experts in their business, and 2) were experts who practiced in other fields. For example, they sought out lawyers, bankers, accountants who could keep them abreast of important new changes in the business.

Theme 5. Recognize and value diversity. The Andragogical Model assumes that adults enter into activities with a different quality of experience from the different roles adults perform, and they value a climate where people feel that they are being treated as human beings. The CEOs' described the importance of respecting and valuing other people. CEOs stated that their employees and customers are becoming increasingly diverse. They work with employees and customers of all ages, sexes, ethnicities, disabilities and differences. CEOs embraced ideas expressed in the words by Work (1996): In the final analysis, true leadership brings people of diverse backgrounds and interests together in ways that provide fair and equitable opportunities to contribute their best, achieve personal goals, and realize their full potential (p. 79). CEOs recognize the importance of learning of others and creating an organization in which learning is encouraged throughout the organization

Theme 6. Be problem solvers. The Andragogical Model acknowledges that adults are motivated to learn after they experience a need to know, and they enter into an activity with a life-task and are problem-centered. The Andragogical process assumes that people tend to feel committed to any decision in proportion to the extent to which they have participated in making it, and they tend to feel uncommitted to any decision that they feel others are making for or imposing on them (Knowles, 1995). The CEOs explained that they had developed an ability to define difficult

problems, find solutions and achieve their goals. CEOs often work with others to solve intricate business problems. They described problems that often complex solved over time through cycles and iterations that is similar to ideas explained in literature (Argyris and Schon , 1974, 1978). During the continuous process of problem-solving, CEOs said that they work with employees individually as well as in groups to resolve problems. They demonstrated the ability to trust their employees and delegate jobs and responsibility effectively to solve problems to reach organizational goals.

Theme 7. Importance of networking. Knowles Model assumes that although there is competition and adults enter into learning activities with rivalry toward fellow learners, the Model also recognizes that peers are often the richest resources for learning. CEOs understood that Networking is a way to gather useful information, build a pool of professional contacts, and position themselves for new opportunities in the long term. The CEOs explained that they were constantly networking to find people who could provide them with the answers to problems. They believed that networking enables them to build relationships, and they do this both at different business functions and in their personal lives (i.e. professional associations, PTA meetings, family functions, and community functions). The respondents also remarked that they believed that in the future, the Internet and E-mail will provide them with another valuable way to network.

Theme 8. Support teamwork and collaboration. The Model assumes that not only do adults learn from peers, but it assumes that people learn more from those they trust and respect rather than from those that they are not sure they can trust. CEOs stated that a climate of mutual trust, support and openness is necessary for optimum learning to take place. They said that they have developed their ability to learn in groups in a variety of situations (e.g., with employees, in courses, in lectures, at conventions, in teaching or training sessions, etc.). Respondents stated that leaders must possess the skills necessary to work in groups effectively, because of demands in business. They explained that such collaborative learning requires communication skills, observation and reflection skills, and planning and consensus skills and developing an organization where people feel comfortable sharing information to work together effectively.

Theme 9. Value the mentoring relationship. The Andragogical Model asserts that adults can be induced to learn by exposing them to role Models and experiences to assess the gaps between where they are now and where they want and need to be in terms of their personal competencies. CEOs described mentors who had been essential in enabling them to become successful CEOs. The respondents stated that teachers were mentors in their early schooling, and throughout their careers they have had many mentors, and as a result, they believe in mentoring others.

Theme 10. Be trainers and teachers. The Andragogical Model asserts that adults experience a need to know or to be able to do something to perform more effectively in some aspect of their lives. Among the chief sources of readiness are the developmental tasks associated with moving from one state to another, or any change, such as in job, activities can induce readiness by providing learners with a diagnostic experiences to assess the gaps between where they know, and where they want and need to be in terms of their personal competencies. Respondents claimed that it was essential to learning new material and gaining insight on solving problems for them to train and teach in the business. The old adages “good leaders are good teachers” and “don’t know what you know until you teach it” applied to these CEOs. They discussed how they learned how to teach through the process of training employees and teaching courses, and through constantly taking training and educational programs throughout their careers. They also gained valuable information through assessments forms and feedback from their employees and students. They affirmed that in a training or teaching session, adults must: be involved, receive content that relates to their specific work setting and expertise, and have an atmosphere or setting that is comfortable. Teachers should use overheads, computer technology, lectures, and cases studies and involve learners through dialogs, questions, and group discussions.

Theme 11. Value integrity and honesty. The Andragogical Model assumes that adults learn best in a setting where people are treated fairly and honestly. CEOs understood that they needed to treat their employees and customers fairly in order to be successful. They explained that their role as CEO creates intense feelings of responsibility and accountability, especially with new laws, lawsuits, etc., in business. CEOs were critically aware of how important their ethical behavior was in their leadership role and to the success of the organization, and they continue to learn to create an environment where people are treated fairly.

Theme 12. Create an open learning environment. The Andragogical Model assumes that adults learn from each other, and when they work well together, learning increases for everyone. Knowles (1995) suggested that although there is rivalry with adults in learning experiences, they work to create open supportive atmospheres that can increase learning and sharing ideas throughout the organization. CEOs recognized the power dynamics of their position as well as their need to transcend that dynamics in order for everyone to work together effectively. With constant changes in the business and the competition, CEOs believe that they must work to build an environment where employees can learn from each other through for the organization to remain profitable. CEOs’ understood the power dynamics of their

position, and that the dynamics is important in shaping “what” and “how” they learn. CEOs’ recognized that his/her role was to transcend the power dynamics in the organization so that they could help employees work together, collaborate, and learn from each other to stay ahead of the competition from other organizations.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study used the framework of Andragogy to uncover and describe the 12 competencies that these CEOs use in their learning process. This section discusses the major conclusions of the research:

The assumptions of the Andragogy appear to provide an excellent Model to explore how CEOs’ learn, and the Model could be used in further research studies with CEOs. Adult learning theories have been used in several studies as a framework of inquiry to explore the leadership phenomena (Sherlock, 2002). And the competencies cited in this study are similar to ones discovered in other research studies on leaders of organizations (Sherlock, 2002; Collins and Holton III, 2003; Senge, 1990; Peters, 1994; Weinstein, 1999; 1998). Knowles (1995) discussed in *Designs for Adult Learning*, how the practical resources, exercises and course outlines he designed in the book could inform employees in the workplace. This study supports the ideas expressed in his Model, and offer many suggestions for incorporating the results of this study into leadership development programs.

Second, the research supports literature on the overall importance for CEOs to be self-directed learners who know how they learn and how to foster continual learning throughout the organization. The CEOs in this study sought out learning opportunities through formal and informal learning activities, and they suggested several activities and programs whereby training programs could incorporate these ideas. Leadership training programs could be designed by utilizing the 12 themes and information discussed in this study. The twelve themes that were cited in this study as key to leadership are consistent with other studies (Collins and Holton III, 2003; Leamornsiri and Schwindt, 2002.).

A third implication was that CEOs’ understood the power dynamics of their position, and that the dynamics is important in shaping “what” and “how” they learn. The Andragogical Model assumes that adults have a deep psychological need to be self-directing, and the CEOs supported this theme by providing learning opportunities and personal growth throughout their organizations. CEOs’ recognized that his/her role was to transcend the power dynamics in the organization so that they could help employees work together, collaborate, and learn from each other to stay ahead of the competition from other organizations. Further research could examine in detail how the competencies CEOs’ used to learn in this context could be utilized in training programs.

Fourth, although of the 33 CEOs, only six were women, the women described how being a woman in the United States contributed to their development of learning strategies that will be important to successful CEOs in the future. The Andragogical Model assumes that adults bring with them a rich background of experiences that is valuable resource for their own learning and that of other students. The women CEOs attributed the formation of their excellent interpersonal skills, working well in teams and in collaboration from being a woman in American society. They believed that women, more than men, are encouraged from childhood to learn how to communicate effectively with family members and friends, as a result, they are able to express ideas openly, share information, and receive feedback.

Future studies should examine how women CEOs’ perhaps possess skills that help them learn effectively that could be applied in leadership training programs.

Last, with the amount of money spent on leadership development and training programs, further research should examine how CEOs learn. Both qualitative and quantitative research should be conducted to examine this topic. Since most of the research has been conducted on leadership training programs with senior management people instead of CEOs, perhaps, there are different qualities or strategies that should be used to develop training programs for CEOs because of their senior position in the company. The lack of understanding of how CEOs’ learn has negative workplace implications for both CEOs and the organizations they serve, and more research could add to the literature in the field.

Implications for HRD Research and Practice

Organizations spend millions each year on leadership training. As we enter the millennium, visionary leadership is needed in HRD to succeed in competitive and changing workplaces (Noe, 2001; Knowles, 1980, 1995; Gilley and Eggland, 1989; Senge, 1990). With increasing global competitiveness, continuous restructuring activities, demographic changes in the workforce, customer demands, and rapid technological changes, CEOs are in a unique professional context to help organizations compete successful today. The CEOs in this study acknowledged that

learning was essential to their success as well as to the organization's profitability. However, most research studies focus on managers and non-CEO learning, even though literature supports that executive learning research provides little insight on the learning of CEOs (Sherlock, 2002). While learning remains a focus of leadership development programs and interventions (Sherlock, 2002; Collins & Holton III, 2003), there is a need to do more research specifically with CEOs to understand how they learn in order to design better-quality programs for future CEOs. Since this study was limited to CEOs in the real estate business, perhaps all the themes that emerged would not be supported by CEOs in other industries.

With the tremendous costs spent on training each year, both human and financial, it is important to constantly add to the research and literature to create more effective leadership programs in HRD. Malcolm Knowles concept of "Andragogy," provides a framework to examine this topic as well as exercises and course outlines that could be explored for use in developing leadership training programs in HRD in the future.

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